

THE MEANING OF GRADES DILEMMA

Stephen is a professor of engineering. He recognizes the importance of teaching in his work as a professor, and he tries to use techniques that require students to take chances and try new things that will help them to grow in both intellectual and personal ways. However, Stephen faces a major dilemma in his work with respect to grading. Like other professors at his college, Stephen has a strong commitment to the meaning of grades, and he refuses to inflate them. As a result, students from his department have traditionally had difficulty gaining acceptance into their desired post-graduate engineering programs: their grade-point averages are not as high as those of competing students from colleges where grade inflation is commonplace. Though Stephen recognizes that his students are at a distinct disadvantage as a result of his school's relative lack of grade inflation, he wants to approach grading fairly.

Stephen is professor of engineering, and he has a deep commitment to teaching his students. He has a strong altruistic streak, volunteers on many committees, and is intellectually curious about topics across disciplines.

Stephen began his graduate career interested in research, and imagined that he would eventually spend his time doing acoustics research at a large university, writing grants, and working with graduate students. Yet during his graduate studies, he also read a great deal of educational theory and psychology. His graduate school experience culminated in what he refers to as an “epiphany moment”:

“I was in the men’s room at my university, and I overheard a conversation between two professors, in which the two were talking about the fact that they did not like teaching undergraduates and preferred to teach graduate students, and to do graduate research. And they were essentially exchanging pointers or tips or comments on how they got out of teaching undergraduates. And one of them was saying ... that he basically reused his lecture notes and didn’t try to put anything extra into it. And so the dean didn’t make him teach that course very often.”

...And I found myself getting very angry at hearing this, but I couldn't quite understand why it mattered to me what these guys did in their teaching. And then I realized that I had absorbed, through my conversations ... the basic philosophy that pedagogy was fundamentally important and that teaching was fundamentally important. Especially at the undergraduate level, and maybe even ... at the primary school level. But in any case, I realized at that moment, something in me said, 'I don't want to be like them. I don't want to just concern myself with teaching undergraduates as this little side issue.' And it was essentially at that moment that I decided I would think about teaching at a small college."

Stephen recognized how much he valued teaching in his work as a professor. He changed the way he worked with students, using techniques that required students to take chances and try new things, not just repeat cookie-cutter experiments, and to encourage them to grow both intellectually and personally.

Stephen feels that many of the professors and administrators at his small college share his beliefs, and that their primary goal is to educate students, not conduct research:

"I have the fundamental assumption that the goals of the college administration and the goals of the community [that represent] the college—its faculty, staff, and students—are congruent. And that we're all working for the same ends, but possibly different in the choices of how to get there ... So I believe that we're all in the same boat, and that we're just trying to figure out where to steer it."

Stephen faces a major dilemma in his work, and this is with respect to grading. He has a very strong sense of the meaning of grades. He believes that each grade represents a different level of understanding, effort, and work, and that grades should accurately reflect what a student has done in his class. Yet many other colleges and engineering programs across the country routinely award students higher grades—after a student complains, for example, or in order to help a student in an application for a job or graduate school.

Like other professors at his college, Stephen has a strong commitment to the meaning of grades and does not inflate them. As a result, students from his department have traditionally had difficulty in gaining acceptance into some top engineering programs. Although they are equally or more qualified, their grade-point averages are not as high as those of competing students from other schools (where grade inflation is more commonplace).

While grades are supposed to represent a range, Stephen observes that there are only two grades that are considered: if you do what you are asked, you get an “A,” and if you do anything less than what you’re asked, you get a “B.” And despite pluses and minuses, “C’s” and “D’s” are not regarded as highly by employers and graduate programs, who will not consider students who have accumulated many grades below a “B.”

Stephen feels that grades should accurately reflect the quality of a student’s work. However, he also recognizes that his students are at a distinct and perhaps debilitating disadvantage; while teachers at other colleges routinely inflated grades, his college and his personal beliefs reject this practice. Stephen has been on committees that reward grants and fellowships based on the standards of grade inflation and he has witnessed students from his institution passed over because their grades were lower than others. He understands that his school’s relative lack of grade inflation means that his students are less successful in these competitions.

Stephen asks:

“How do you live in the world and yet still be true to your internal notions of what’s right? For instance, if you’re in a world of people whose business interests cheat and connive and do things that are underhanded and illegal, but you don’t want to do those things, but you still have to compete with them and not go out of business—how do you manage?”

Unable to change the practices of other institutions, yet strong in his own convictions, Stephen is in a difficult position.